



Health promotion education in Austria: The status quo and development perspectives

Abstract: *Health promotion education is a basic requirement for quality-assured health promotion practice. At universities of applied sciences, health promotion can be studied to gain professional qualifications; it is also taught in individual courses in degree programmes for health and social professions. At universities, there is an explicit focus on health promotion in public health training courses and an implicit focus in related disciplines. Over the last few years, both universities of applied sciences and universities have launched part-time in-service training courses relating to health promotion. For practitioners there are also continuing and further education courses at non-university institutions, which principally cover competencies relating to behavioural approaches. To remain internationally compatible and to ensure the quality of courses on offer, in the future it will be necessary to boost initial education programmes in setting-oriented health promotion, agree on a competencies framework, develop general frameworks with the participation of the relevant ministries and educational organizations, and support ongoing networking.*

Health promotion education as a basic requirement for quality-assured health promotion

*To achieve the objectives laid down in the Health Promotion Act, it is necessary, amongst other things, to **“support the continuing education of individuals working in health promotion and disease prevention”.***

(GfG 1998)

To cope with current challenges (e.g. the increase in chronic conditions, digital transformation, growing health inequities) in relation to the health of the Austrian population, qualified personnel are required to implement health promotion in various settings, from local communities via healthcare facilities to workplaces. One basic requirement for quality-assured health promotion practice is a well-founded health promotion education (Aluttis et al. 2014; Griebler/Christ 2019). This can ensure the quality of the health promotion remit in public administration and health care as well as in other fields relevant to health promotion (such as urban planning and social work).

This factsheet provides an overview of the status quo of the health promotion education landscape in Austria and can serve as a basis for making decisions about further developments in health promotion education in Austria. The factsheet will be made available to decision makers so that the aspect of education can be incorporated into current strategies and policies for health promotion based on sound knowledge.

Mapping health promotion education

From April to June 2022, an initial search was carried out in study portals (studienwahl.at, studieren.at) using the search terms “Gesundheitsförderung” and “health promotion”. This was complemented by a selective search for relevant non-university courses provided by recognized institutions which are committed to the basic principles of health promotion in their work (FGÖ 2021b). Data¹ on courses on offer were collected and documented in a structured manner. The contents of curricula were not analysed; instead an assessment of whether to include them or not was made on the basis of their educational goals. One criterion for inclusion was the orientation of a course towards health promotion in accordance with the Ottawa Charter (WHO 1986). To obtain the perspectives of relevant stakeholders and to contextualize the search results, in June 2022, guided interviews were carried out with six experts who were teaching or carrying out research in health promotion at that time. Building upon these interviews, two workshops were held with experts (n = 18) who were also involved in teaching, and the results of those were also integrated in the mapping. On the basis of these data, a first draft of the factsheet was produced that was commented on by another eight experts in the field of health promotion (research and administration).



Results: The status quo of health promotion education in Austria

Health promotion is taught **explicitly** at **5 out of the 21 universities of applied sciences**, mostly within departments of management. There are three master’s degree programmes (FH Burgenland 2022a; FH Joanneum 2022b; FH Kärnten 2022b) and five bachelor’s degree programmes (Ferdinand Porsche FernFH 2022a; FH Burgenland 2022b; FH Joanneum 2022a; FH Kärnten 2022a; MCI 2022). The main focus of the degree programmes is on project management in settings-based health promotion. In master’s degree programmes applications-oriented teaching is realized in project work with academic institutions, administrative bodies, and health promotion organizations.

Individual courses on health promotion worth two to three ECTS on average are taught in **bachelor’s degree programmes in health and social professions** or as electives in master’s degree programmes (e.g. social innovation) at universities of applied sciences. At **two universities of applied sciences** there are fee-based **further education courses** (Ferdinand Porsche FernFH 2022b; FH Campus Wien 2022) focusing on health promotion. One university of applied sciences also offers micro-credentials for diversity-sensitive health promotion in old age (6 ECTS) (Ferdinand Porsche FernFH 2022c, S. 21).

At **universities**, health promotion is mostly taught as part of the four postgraduate programmes **Master of Public Health** (Medizinische Universität Graz 2022; Medizinische Universität Wien 2022; Paracelsus Medizinische Privatuniversität 2022; UMIT Tirol 2022) (based on the WHO-ASPHER Competency Framework for the Public Health Workforce in the European Region, World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe 2020). In addition, health promotion is included in individual courses in programmes such as sport and exercise science, psychology, and health sociology at bachelor’s and master’s level as well as in medicine. In teacher education programmes, health promotion is included in the subjects of

¹ Degree programmes or training courses, personnel, cooperation with other institutions, educational goals, target groups, potential occupational fields or qualification profiles, admission requirements, structure and organization (ECTS), level of degree

sport and nutrition. In addition, there are two fee-based further education courses relating to health promotion (Pädagogische Hochschule Steiermark 2022; Universität für Weiterbildung Krems 2022).

At **non-university institutions** there is a wealth of courses for practitioners in the health and social sectors which especially address competencies relating to behavioural approaches to health promotion. Courses offered by institutions that are committed to fulfilling the quality criteria of health promotion are organized within the framework of the Austrian Health Promotion Fund's Educational Network (FGÖ-Bildungsnetzwerk), including seminar programmes for those implementing health promotion, for companies, and for mayors, or a training course on health promotion in schools (FGÖ 2021a), and the Austrian Platform for Health Literacy (Österreichische Plattform für Gesundheitskompetenz), which provides communication training and train-the-trainer courses for health professionals (ÖPGK 2022). The Austrian Network for Workplace Health Promotion (Netzwerk BGF) cooperates with the Institute for Health Promotion and Prevention (Institut für Gesundheitsförderung und Prävention) to provide further education. In addition, addiction prevention centres at regional level offer further education for educators. Relevant continuing and further education courses are also provided by international networks or organizations (z B., European School Education Platform European Commission 2022; Schools for Health in Europe 2022). Special training courses are organized for community nurses to boost their health promotion skills, the Platform for Primary Care puts on webinars on health promotion (Plattform Primärversorgung 2022), and the Austrian Public Health Insurance Fund (ÖGK) runs health literacy training for its employees (Klausberger 2022).

Challenges in health promotion education



At the **universities of applied sciences** there is strong competition between degree programmes which address similar, socially relevant issues like health promotion. When funds or study places are allocated, despite increasing demand from students, particularly for master's degree programmes in the field of health promotion, MINT (mathematics, informatics, natural sciences, and technology) degree programmes receive more support.

At **universities**, the challenge is that health promotion tends to be perceived as additional training but not as an integral part of university education. What is more, different disciplines have a different understanding of health promotion, one of the dangers being that health promotion is equated with prevention. That is why ongoing discourse and reflection are necessary on the components of health promotion in relevant disciplines as well as on their theoretical foundations (e.g. salutogenesis). In addition, degree programmes at medical universities should offer courses on inter- and transdisciplinary research and practice.

With regard to **non-university courses**, experts consider that the major challenge is for such courses to reach relevant professional groups like doctors. In addition, it has not yet been possible to establish tried-and-tested continuing and further education courses throughout Austria. The experts were also critical of the fact that the contents focused strongly on behavioural approaches and less so on settings-oriented ones.



Development perspectives for health promotion education in Austria

In order to expand health promotion education in Austria, short-term, medium-term, and longer-term steps are required that build on one another.

In the short term, over the next few years, it will be necessary to launch an intensive exchange of ideas on content at events like conferences on health promotion education as well as to agree on a **competencies framework for health promotion** and how to establish it. Austrian experts on health promotion education recommend taking the conceptual framework CompHP as a guideline that emerged from the WHO's policy framework and strategy "Health 2020" for the European Region and that defines core competencies in health promotion (IUPHE et al. 2014). Universities and universities of applied sciences are already using CompHP as a guideline for curricula development, which has proved to be very useful and supports international recognition. In the future, **exchange** and **networking between educational institutions** should be intensified in relation to CompHP. Systematic implementation of the competencies framework can ensure, amongst other things, that competencies are taught which cover the implementation of resource- and settings-oriented health promotion.

The **International Union for Health Promotion Education** manages a list of accredited degree programmes worldwide based on the CompHP standards (IUHPE 2022). **Experiences from Ireland and Italy** concerning the implementation of health promotion in education reveal that **national structures** are needed to ensure **coordination, networking, awareness raising, and knowledge transfer** with regard to health promotion competencies (Battel-Kirk/Barry 2019). Examples of structures in the area of knowledge transfer and networking include **joint platforms** on which **best-practice examples from courses** can be shared.



Another lever for boosting health promotion education is to provide **support for early career researchers**. In the future, support like the Health Research Award² should be encouraged more strongly. In addition, **PhD programmes in Health Promotion** and a **Master in Health Promotion (MSc)** should be **established**. As a stop-gap measure, a funding programme could be set up to support students following a PhD programme in Health Promotion abroad. Positive experiences have already been gathered in the field of Public Health; the Province of Styria used to finance such a programme. Another way of promoting early career researchers is to set up and expand on transdisciplinary research projects at universities. Good-practice examples in this area could be taken from universities of applied sciences, where all master's degree programmes include at least one-year practical or transdisciplinary research projects in their curricula. All tertiary educational institutions should expand their cooperation with non-university institutions with respect to bachelor's and master's theses, research projects, and internships. In addition, there is a need for targeted teaching of methodological expertise in the areas of participatory research, action research, and implementation research.

According to the experts, universities of applied sciences provide suitable educational settings for **modular, certified (advanced) training courses** that allow flexibility for target groups requiring in-service training and integrate modules from different areas. **Good-practice examples** include **formats** making use of **blended learning** and **micro-credentials** (compact training courses which aim to provide additional

² At present there is a Health Research Award sponsored by the **Austrian Network of Degree Programmes at Universities of Applied Sciences in Health Management** (Österreichisches Netzwerk der FH-Studiengänge für Gesundheitsmanagement) that honours Master's theses written in health promotion.

qualifications in the sense of lifelong learning). Existing teaching content from bachelor's and master's degree programmes could be used as the basis for this (see, e.g., Ferdinand Porsche FernFH 2022c).

At universities, there is still a need for greater **integration of health promotion in degree programmes for human medicine, psychology, and sociology**. Universities can also draw on the experience of integrating health promotion in degree programmes for health and social professions at universities of applied sciences. In the future, it would be relevant to agree on common theories, concepts, and methods in the interests of quality development. Alliances of educational institutions should offer more innovative formats with a focus on health promotion, particularly at universities (e.g. lecture series).

The **non-university sector** has a key role to play in terms of **lifelong learning**. Courses for practitioners should be developed in conjunction with the sector, offering a good balance between behavioural approaches and settings-oriented competencies. Experts also recommend courses for practitioners on evidence-based work and participatory methods. In addition, proven, quality-assured courses should be established nationwide and low-threshold event formats launched at which practitioners of health promotion can generate emerging ideas or exchange views on current topics in open meetings (e.g. Sustainable Development Goals and health promotion).

In the medium to long term, according to the experts, a concrete **strategy for health promotion education** is required in Austria in which long-term strategic goals and resources as well as responsibilities for health promotion education are defined in a participatory manner (cf. World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe 2022). Important partners (organizations) include the Federal Ministry of Education, Science, and Research (BMBWF), the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care, and Consumer Protection (BMSGPK), the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria), representatives of educational institutions, and administrative academies as well as representatives of social security institutions and occupational groups. A first step would involve **sensitizing** these **stakeholders** to the necessity of quality-assured health promotion education as well as to the essential general framework (e.g. sources of funding for Master's degrees in Health Promotion).

Conclusion

Health promotion education in Austria is fragmentary and dynamic. There is a need to establish and enhance quality-assured health promotion education; ideally this should continue to involve all relevant individuals/institutions. In the short term, closer networking should be encouraged for professional exchange and joint initiatives involving various stakeholders from politics, research, education, and administration as well as working internationally on a common understanding of health promotion by practitioners in the field (Biehl et al. 2021).

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Suggested citation: Wahl, Anna; Plunger, Petra (2023): Health promotion education in Austria: The status quo and development perspectives. Factsheet. Gesundheit Österreich, Vienna
